

Forest management under discussion by British and Basque scientists

Throughout evolution the human species has had a close relationship with forests. Wood and other forest products have been primary sources of energy and have played important roles throughout the evolution of human culture. The initial effects on forests were minimal and it is considered that the first major impact on forests came with the development of agriculture. The impact on forests became greater when man began constructing arms and warships from wood, in Egyptian times. However, since then the situation has changed greatly and global timber usage per person is currently at 0.7m³ per annum, which gives us an idea of the vast quantity of trees which must be felled in order to satisfy demand. However, the exploitation of these resources should be continued in a sustainable manner.

The term Sustainable Development has become popularised ever since the Rio Earth Summit and is defined as the use of resources in such a way as to ensure that there is no danger of their extinction. However, putting this principle into practise is difficult, and referring specifically to the use of forests, there is no consensus regarding what the concept of sustainable development should really mean.

The exchange of ideas and points of view between scientists and technicians is a essential when it comes to putting forward management criteria regarding environmental issues. When decisions have to be made, it is vital that these criteria be discussed by technicians from the relevant administrations, landowners and the public.

In line with this policy of putting people with different viewpoints into contact, Eusko Ikaskuntza organised a conference at Oxford University in May 1998, bringing together scientists from British and Basque universities with the aim of contrasting opinions and analysing the problematics of forest management. Under the title "The Sustainable Development of Forests: aspiration and the reality," prestigious English scientists from Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial College were brought together with scientists from the University of the Basque Country and the Public University of Navarra as well as with representatives from the Basque Government Department of Agriculture and the province of Bizkaia. A wide range of topics were discussed, concerning the problems involved with the sustainable exploitation of forests.

Professors F. Thompson, E.F. Bruenig and Jeff Burley, director of the Oxford University Forestry Institute and president of the IUFRO (International Union of Forestry Research

Organisations) agreed on the need to define sustainability criteria. These criteria can help us to work towards the same global objectives, but should be made more specific for each individual type of forest, adjusting to meet the peculiarities of each site.

As far as the ideas and viewpoints put forward by the Basque members of the conference are concerned, Ibone Amezaga, lecturer at the University of Navarra and myself commented on the situation in the Basque Country. In the Basque Country a substantial percentage of land coverage is made up of conifer plantations (65% of the current forest coverage in the provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa) and there is a very low percentage of native forest coverage, amongst which one of the most decimated is oak forest. It seems vital that soil nutrient levels, in other words soil fertility, be maintained and as such this should be one of the principle aims of global sustainable forestry policy.

Mario Michel from the Basque Government Department of Agriculture spoke about the problems associated with ecocertification with respect to the definition of sustainability criteria and the uncertainty regarding their application in the Basque Country.

The social, political and legal aspects of the debate were discussed by Professor R. Bermejo, who spoke about "The free market versus sustainable development" and Professor D. Loperena who spoke about "The environmental rights of the citizen".

In the closing debate, it was made clear that human pressures on the environment make conservation policies increasingly important. In this sense, it is vital that we seek to find a balance between public and private interests in order to achieve the desired equilibrium between exploitation and conservation.

Shortly, Eusko Ikaskuntza will publish the presentations made at the conference as well as the conclusions of the debate.

Miren Onaindia Olalde